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ABSTRACT

Drawing on J. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1991, 1995), this study explores the effects of teacher, family, and church support on the school-related attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement of African American, urban adolescents. To achieve this objective, 826 students in an urban school district in the southeastern United States completed a questionnaire measuring: (1) student perceptions of teacher support; (2) student perceptions of parental support; (3) church involvement; (4) school behavior; (5) academic self-concept; (6) achievement ideology; and (7) academic achievement. Interviews were conducted with a subset of the research population (40 students) to enhance and aid in the interpretation of the questionnaire data. Results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses show that students' perceptions of teacher and parental academic support and church involvement indirectly influence achievement through their positive and significant influence on one or more of the attitudinal and behavioral variables measured. Students' academic self-concepts, achievement ideology, and school behavior, therefore, are qualities influenced by the school, family, and church. Partnership activities among these institutions that may enhance these qualities for more students are discussed. (Contains 2 figures, 2 tables, and 23 references.) (Author/SLD)

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CRESPAR

SCHOOL – FAMILY – COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN, URBAN ADOLESCENTS

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Report No. 7 / November 1996

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK

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SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN, URBAN ADOLESCENTS

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Report No. 7

November 1996

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The Center

Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life. Yet far too many children, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at risk by school practices that are based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive high-expectations instruction while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures. The sorting perspective must be replaced by a "talent development" model that asserts that all children are capable of succeeding in a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support.

The mission of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) is to conduct the research, development, evaluation, and dissemination needed to transform schooling for students placed at risk. The work of the Center is guided by three central themes — ensuring the success of all students at key development points, building on students' personal and cultural assets, and scaling up effective programs — and conducted through seven research and development programs and a program of institutional activities.

CRESPAR is organized as a partnership of Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, in collaboration with researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara, the University of California at Los Angeles, University of Oklahoma, University of Chicago, Manpower Research Demonstration Corporation, WestEd Regional Laboratory, University of Memphis, and University of Houston-Clear Lake.

Abstract

Drawing upon Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, this study explores the effects of teacher, family and church support on the school-related attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement of African American, urban adolescents. To achieve this objective, 826 students in an urban school district in the southeastern United States completed a questionnaire measuring: (1) student perceptions of teacher support; (2) student perceptions of parental support; (3) church involvement; (4) school behavior; (5) academic self-concept; (6) achievement ideology; and (7) academic achievement. Interviews were conducted with a subset of the research population (40 students) to enhance and aid in the interpretation of the questionnaire data. Results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses show that students' perceptions of teacher and parental academic support, and church involvement indirectly influence achievement through their positive and significant influence on one or more of the attitudinal and behavioral variables measured. Students' academic self-concept, achievement ideology and school behavior, therefore, are qualities influenced by the school, family, and church. Partnership activities among these institutions that may enhance these qualities for more students are discussed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Joyce Epstein, Dr. Antoinette Mitchell, and John Hollifield for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this report. I would also like to thank the assistant superintendent, teachers, counselors, and students who made this research both possible and enjoyable. I hope that the findings promote greater understanding of the educational experience of African American, urban youth and promote positive change for this student population.

Introduction

The school performance of African American youth remains a pressing issue in education. High dropout rates (Rumberger, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1991), and poor grades and low test scores (Humphreys, 1988) among members of this population, especially those in urban school districts, underscore the importance of continued research on factors influencing school outcomes for these youth. Accordingly, the present study seeks to determine if and how support from institutions responsible for the care and socialization of African American, urban youth influences their school-related attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement. A clear understanding of how these institutions influence achievement will increase our knowledge of how they might best work collectively to ensure the success of these youth.

Theoretical Model: Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The relationship between schools, families, and communities has been viewed from a variety of perspectives (see Parsons, 1959; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The framework used here, overlapping spheres of influence, is one developed nearly a decade ago by Epstein (1987). This theory integrates a wealth of educational, sociological, and psychological perspectives on social organizations, as well as research on the effects of family, school, and community environments on educational outcomes (for a detailed discussion, see Epstein, 1987, 1992). Acknowledging the "interlocking histories of the major institutions that socialize and educate children" (Epstein, 1992, pp. 1140-41), a central principle of this theory is that certain goals, such as student academic success, are of mutual interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support. Pictorially, this perspective is represented by three spheres symbolizing school, family, and community, whose relative relationship is determined by the attitudes and practices of individuals within each context (Epstein, 1992).

Based upon years of research, Epstein (1995) has identified six types of school-family-community involvement important to student learning and development. These are:

1. parenting — helping all families establish home environments that support children as students;

2. communicating — designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school programs and children's progress;
3. volunteering — recruiting and organizing help and support for school functions and activities;
4. learning at home — providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with schoolwork and related activities;
5. decision-making — including parents in school decisions; and
6. collaborating with the community — identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families (for a more detailed discussion, see Epstein, 1995).

Different practices can be implemented to foster each of the six types of involvement. The objective, however, is for schools, families, and their surrounding communities to aid each other in rearing healthy, successful children.

This study draws upon Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence to examine factors affecting the academic achievement of African American, urban adolescents. It does so by identifying common areas of influence of three institutions of socialization — the school, the family, and the church.

School, Family, and Church as Overlapping Spheres

Previous research has established the importance of family support (Coleman, 1987; Clark, 1983; Durkin, 1984; Walberg, 1984; Lee, 1984) and teacher support (Irvine, 1990; Sizemore, 1981; Holliday, 1985; Shade, 1982) for academic achievement, especially for African American and other minority students. Additional studies have shown a link between church involvement and academic achievement and attainment for African Americans (Blau, 1981; Brown & Gary, 1991; Freeman, 1986). The studies cited above were important for identifying key practices that teachers, parents, and institutions, such as the black church, can and do employ to promote positive educational outcomes for African American youth.

The present study builds upon and extends this research by examining how these institutions affect student achievement. Specifically, this study examines the effects of support from these institutions on three attitudinal and behavioral variables that have a significant

influence on academic achievement and engagement. These are: academic self-concept (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; Frerichs, 1970); achievement ideology (Mickelson, 1990; Ford, 1992; Trotter, 1991; Polite, 1992); and school behavior (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore 1982; Purkey & Smith 1983; Diprete, 1981; Baker, 1985). The model tested is shown in Figure 1.

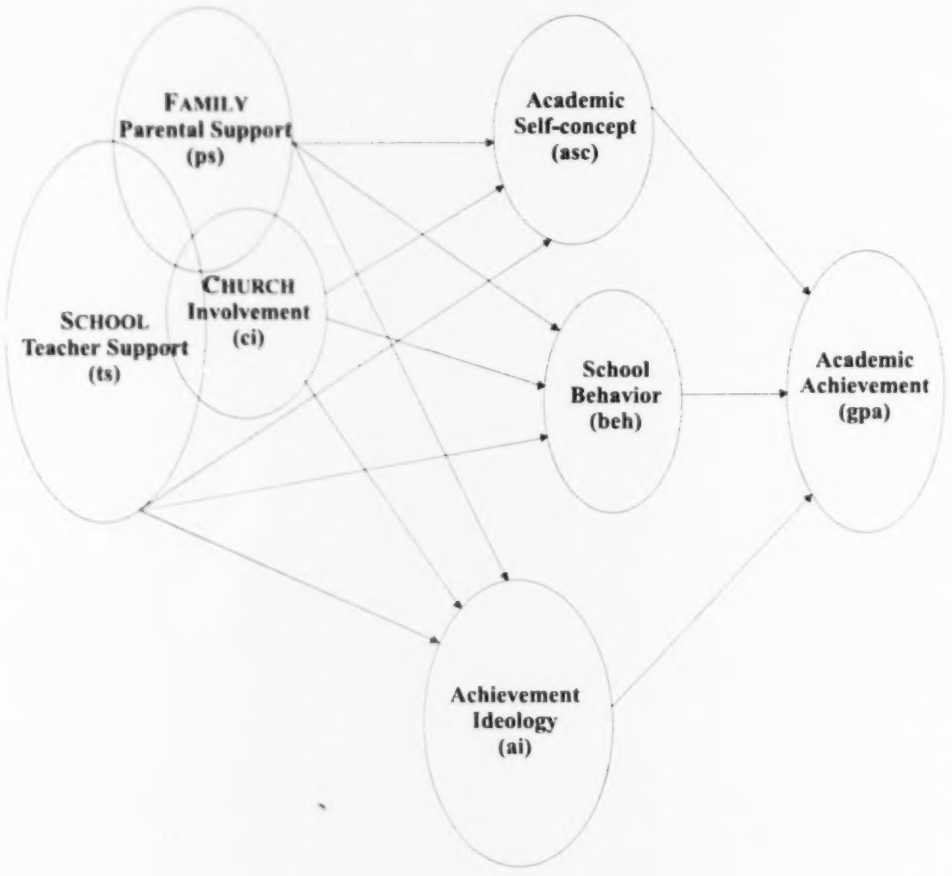

Figure 1. Model of the hypothesized relationships between institutional support, academic self-concept, school behavior, achievement ideology and academic achievement for African American, urban eighth-graders.

Methods

Population

The study's population consisted of eight hundred twenty-six (443 female, 383 male) African American, eighth-grade students attending eight of nineteen middle schools in an urban school district in the southeastern United States. These schools provided a representative sample of African American students within the district. Eighth-grade students were selected for the study because early adolescence is a pivotal time for school achievement.

According to a number of authors (Elmen, 1991; Kramer, 1991; Lipsitz, 1981), early adolescence is a vulnerable period when students begin to make choices that will affect their future educational and career plans. Several researchers have found that for many early adolescents, there is a gradual decline in various indicators of academic motivation, behavior, and self-perception leading to lower academic achievement and increased rates of school dropout (see Eccles & Midgley, 1988). Additional research is needed to promote greater understanding of the factors that affect student achievement during this critical period in a child's psychological and physical development, especially research that focuses on African American adolescents.

Setting

The study was conducted in a southeastern city with a population of approximately 300,000. The city's public school district comprises 81 schools, which serve approximately 42,000 students enrolled in grades K-12; nineteen are middle schools serving grades six through eight. Ninety percent of the student population is minority, predominantly African American. The racial composition of the student population is similar to that of a number of urban school districts in major southeastern cities. For example, the school districts of New Orleans, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; and Richmond, Virginia have more than 80 percent African American student populations (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). These school districts are also similar to the study's sample in that 25 percent or more of their school-age children are from families below the poverty level (MDR's School Directory 1994-1995).

Measures

Instrument. Students participating in the study completed a five-point, Likert-type questionnaire administered by the author between October and January of 1993/1994. Students were not required to write their names on the questionnaires that took, on average, thirty minutes to complete. The variables measured by the survey are described below.

Teacher Support (ts). Students' perceptions of teachers' encouragement of academic endeavors and achievement were measured using items from the teacher support scale developed by Eggert, Herting, & Thompson (1991). Items in the scale (alpha = .82) were:

a. My teachers do not treat me fairly (reverse code);
b. My teachers help other students more than they help me (reverse code);
c. My teachers don't care if I fail or succeed (reverse code);
d. When I need help with my schoolwork, I feel comfortable asking my teachers;
e. My teachers try to help me do well in school;
f. My teachers really try to help me understand the lesson.

Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score.

Parental Support (ps). Students' perceptions of parents' encouragement of academic endeavors and achievement were measured using items from the parental support scale developed by Eggert, Herting, & Thompson (1991). Items in the scale (alpha = .76) were:

a. My parents make sure that I do my homework;
b. My parents make sure that I go to school every day;
c. If I didn't do well in school, my parents would try to help me;
d. My parents always study my report card carefully;
e. My parents praise me when I do well in school.

The response format for the scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score.

Church Involvement (ci). Students' levels of participation in church and related activities were measured by a scale developed by the author. Items in the scale (alpha = .73) were:

a. I attend church service frequently;
b. Members of my church know me well;
c. I am a member of at least one church group.

Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score.

Achievement Ideology (ai). Students' perceptions of the importance of schooling and academic achievement to future success were measured by a scale developed by the author, and informed by Mickelson's Attitude Scale (see Mickelson, 1990). Items in the scale (alpha = .71) were:

a. School will help me get a good job when I am older;
b. I work hard in school now because I know that it will help me get a good job later;
c. School will not help me get a good job when I am older (reverse code);
d. I don't think that doing well in school will help me to improve my life (reverse code);
e. I need a good education to get a good job;
f. I think that doing well in school is important for my future.

Response categories ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score.

Academic Self-Concept (asc). Students' perceptions of their ability to learn and succeed in school were measured by a modified version of the Brookover Self-Concept of School Ability Scale (Brookover, Paterson, & Thomas 1962). The items in the scale (alpha = .74) were:

a. How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your class at school?
b. Where do you think you would rank in your class in high school?
c. Do you think you have the ability to complete college?
d. Where do you think you would rank in your class in college?
e. Forget for a moment how others grade your work. In your own opinion how good do you think that your work is?
f. What kind of grades do you think you are capable of getting?

Response categories for items **a**, **b** and **d** ranged from among the poorest (1) to among the best (5); **c** ranged from no, I know that I don't (1) to yes, I am sure that I do (5); **e** ranged from my work is much below average (1) to my work is excellent (5), and **f** ranged from mostly **F**s (1) to mostly **A**s (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score.

School Behavior (beh). Students' conduct in school was measured by a scale developed by the author. Items in the scale (alpha = .83) were:

a. I get into fights (not arguments) with other students;
b. I break school rules;
c. I get sent from the classroom for misbehaving;
d. I get sent to the principal for misbehaving;
e. My parents have to come to the school because of my behavior.

The response format ranged from very often (1) to never (5). The items of the scale were summed for a total score, with a high score indicating good behavior.

Academic Achievement (gpa). A summation of students' self-reported grades in social studies, science, English and mathematics was used as the measure of academic achievement (gpa). That is, the letter grade reported by students for each of the above academic subjects was converted to a number based upon a four-point scale, and added to determine overall academic achievement.

Background Variables. The instrument also contained an item to determine students' participation in the free or reduced lunch program. A dichotomous or *dummy* variable (income) was created. Students living at or below poverty level (533) were coded as zero, and students living above poverty level (293) were coded as one.

In addition, students reported on their household structure. Forty-eight percent of students reported living in single-parent households, almost all with their mothers; 44 percent reported living with two parents, and 8 percent reported living with legal guardians A dummy variable (npar) was created to represent family structure, with single-parent households coded as zero and all others as one.

A dummy variable for students' sex was also created; male students were coded as zero and females as one. Lastly, students reported their ages, which ranged from 12 to 17. Less than

one percent of the students were 12; the majority (60 percent) were 13; an additional 29 percent were 14, and approximately 10 percent were 15 or older.

Interviews. After the administration of the questionnaire, 40 students (16 male, 24 female) were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These students differed in achievement level and were recommended by school counselors and teachers. The interviews were conducted by the author and students were assured of anonymity. Each interview took about one hour and covered topics such as beliefs about schooling, activities in and out of school, future educational and employment plans, and relationships with teachers and family. The interviews supplemented and enriched the surveys and aided in interpreting the quantitative data.

Analysis

Structural equations analysis was used to analyze the questionnaire data. The model shown in Figure 1 guided the analysis. The model assumes that support from the family, church, and school directly influences key attitudinal and behavioral variables that, in turn, directly influence academic achievement. Based upon this model, a series of multiple regressions were carried out using the SAS statistical package. The first three regression equations below test the hypotheses that teacher support, family support, and church involvement directly influence (1) academic self-concept; (2) school behavior, and (3) achievement ideology. The final equation tests the hypothesis that school behavior, achievement ideology, and academic self-concept influence academic achievement.

1. $asc=b_0+b_1(ts)+b_2(ps)+b_3(ci)$
2. $beh=b_0+b_1(ts)+b_2(ps)+b_3(ci)$
3. $ai=b_0+b_1(ts)+b_2(ps)+b_3(ci)$
4. $gpa=b_0+b_1(beh)+b_2(ai)+b_3(asc)$

Additional analyses were conducted to account for the effects of the measured background variables on relationships hypothesized in the path model. These background variables — poverty level (income), family structure (npar), sex, and age — were included in the regression equations predicting academic self-concept, school behavior, and achievement ideology.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Data

The means, standard deviations, score ranges, and correlations among the major variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Figure 2 shows the results of the structural analysis. The numbers (standardized regression coefficients - β) accompanying the arrows represent the percentage of a standard deviation that the endogenous (effect) variable changes for each standard deviation change in the exogenous (causal) variable, if only direct effects are considered. Paths that have a coefficient of .05 or greater and are statistically significant at $p<.05$ are interpreted as meaningful.

Table 1. Variable Means, Standard Deviations, and Range (N=827)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Parental Support (ps)	21.7	3.5	7 - 25
Church Involvement (ci)	10.4	3.6	0 - 15
Teacher Support (ts)	21.8	5.3	3 - 30
School Behavior (beh)	20.1	3.9	5 - 25
Achievement Ideology (ai)	26.7	3.4	13 - 30
Academic Self-Concept (asc)	23.1	3.2	12 - 30
Self-reported Grades (gpa)	9.4	3.4	0 - 16

Table 2. Zero Order Correlations

	ps	ci	ts	beh	ai	asc	sex	pov	npar	age	gpa
Parental Support (ps)	1.000	.229	.300	.215	.358	.229	.109	.031	-.047	-.135	.126
Church Involvement (ci)	.229	1.000	.124	.175	.166	.229	.115	.109	-.127	-.177	.179
Teacher Support (ts)	.300	.124	1.000	.311	.294	.109	.076	-.056	.005	-.058	.121
School Behavior (beh)	.215	.175	.311	1.000	.286	.196	.302	.116	-.071	-.257	.300
Achievement Ideology (ai)	.358	.166	.294	.286	1.000	.326	.148	.028	-.087	-.145	.261
Academic Self-Concept (asc)	.229	.246	.109	.196	.326	1.000	.050	.038	-.117	-.178	.443
Sex	.109	.115	.076	.302	.148	.050	1.000	-.014	.054	-.190	.224
Poverty Status (pov)	.031	.109	-.056	.116	.028	.038	-.014	1.000	-.233	-.175	.151
Number of Parents (npar)	-.047	-.127	.005	-.071	-.087	-.117	.054	-.233	1.000	.026	-.111
Age	-.135	-.177	-.058	-.257	-.145	-.179	-.190	-.175	.026	1.000	-.266
Academic Achievement (gpa)	.126	.179	.121	.300	.261	.443	.224	.151	-.111	-.266	1.000

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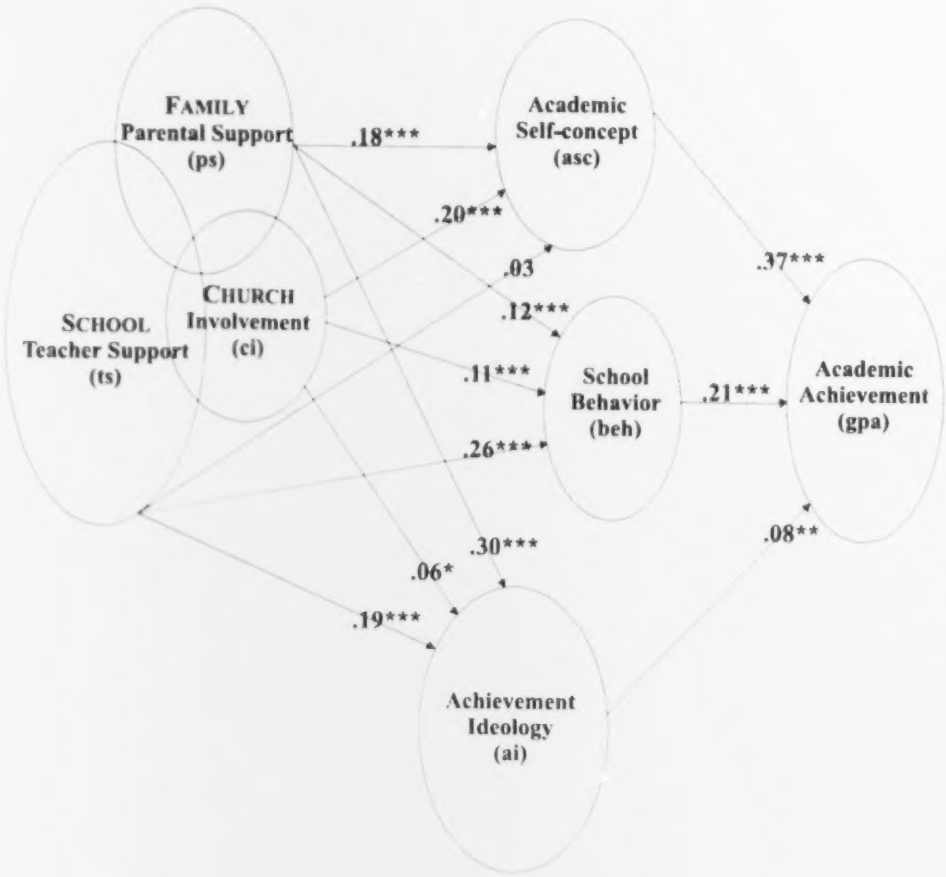

Figure 2. Model showing result of analyses for African American, urban eighth-graders. N=826

*** = p<.001; **=p<.01; *=p<.05

Academic Self-Concept. Parental support (β=.18, $p<.001$) and church involvement (β=.20, $p<.001$) have moderate and positive effects on student academic self-concept. Teacher support, however, does not have a significant influence on academic self-concept. This finding may indicate that individuals who have consistently been in the child's life before early adolescence have the greatest influence on this variable. Alternatively, it may reflect the content of the teacher support scale. The scale was designed to measure students' perceptions of teacher academic support and assessibility. Perhaps a scale measuring the extent to which teachers not only assist with student learning, but emphasize and reward students for excellence would have yielded positive effects on student academic self-concept. This possibility and the fact that only nine percent of the variance in academic self-concept is explained by this model, suggest the need to explore additional individual, school, home, and community factors that influence African American, urban adolescents' beliefs about their academic ability.

Achievement Ideology. Each of the contextual support variables has a significant and positive influence on students' beliefs about the importance of school to future success. Teacher support (β=.19, $p<.001$), parental support (β=.30, $p<.001$), and church involvement (β=.06, $p<.05$) account for 17 percent of the variance in student achievement ideology. Regression coefficients indicate a slight effect for church involvement, and stronger effects of parental and teacher support on achievement ideology. For each standard deviation increase in the latter two variables, achievement ideology increases by 30 percent and 19 percent of a standard deviation, respectively. The large effect of teacher support suggests that when students perceive that their teachers are committed to their academic success, students' belief in the importance of education and their commitment to learning increases.

School Behavior. Parental support (β=.12, $p<.001$), teacher support (β=.26, $p<.001$), and church involvement (β=.11, $p<.001$) positively and significantly influence student conduct in school. Students who report greater responsiveness from teachers, more encouragement and concern from parents, and greater participation in church activities are better behaved and less likely to face serious disciplinary action at school. The model explains 13 percent of the variance in school behavior.

Academic Achievement. Academic self-concept (β=.37, $p<.001$), achievement ideology (β=.08, $p<.01$), and school behavior (β=.21, $p<.001$) have significant and positive effects on self-reported grades in four academic subjects — mathematics, social studies,

English, and science. Students who feel confident about learning, see education as a viable route to future employment and success, and avoid serious trouble in school do better in all their subjects than other students. The three variables taken together predict 24 percent of the variance in students' self-reported grades.

Background Effects. The influence of family, teacher, and church support on student attitudes, behavior, and success in school is well established with these analyses. It may be, however, that these positive effects are linked to other family and student characteristics. To test this possibility, the background variables of income, family structure, sex, and age were added to the regression equations predicting academic self-concept, achievement ideology, and school behavior. The inclusion of these variables does not alter the effects reported except by reducing the significance of the relationships between church involvement and school behavior, and church involvement and achievement ideology. When the background variables are included, the standardized regression coefficients for the effect of church involvement on school behavior and achievement ideology are reduced to .05 and .04 respectively, and are no longer significant at $p<.05$.

Thus, for the students surveyed, much of the effect of church involvement on school behavior and achievement ideology may be explained by other variables — sex, age, poverty status, and family structure — that affect student participation in church. The positive effect of church involvement on academic self-concept, however, remains significant even when controlling for the background variables. The positive effects of parental support on school behavior, academic self-concept, and achievement ideology, and the positive effects of teacher support on school behavior and achievement ideology also remain significant even when controlling for the effects of sex, age, poverty status, and family structure.

Combined Effects. Additional analyses were conducted to determine if the combined effects of church involvement, teacher, and parental support on academic self-concept, achievement ideology, and school behavior are stronger than the independent effect of each on these attitudinal and behavioral variables. A new variable was constructed. This variable (sum), a summation of each of the support variables, and the background variables of sex, age, poverty status, and family structure were included in regression equations predicting academic self-concept, achievement ideology, and school behavior.

The effects of combined support from the family, church, and school on academic self-concept ($\beta=.24$, $p<.001$), achievement ideology ($\beta=.37$, $p<.001$), and school behavior ($\beta=.29$,

$p<.001$) are stronger than the independent effects of support from each of these institutions. The results of these analyses suggest that irrespective of age, family structure, sex, and poverty status, when a student receives support from the family, church, and school, the effects on his or her academic self-concept, achievement ideology, and school behavior are magnified.

Qualitative Data

To further clarify the above findings, interview data were analyzed. The excerpts that follow were selected to clarify the primary effects established by the quantitative data. These are: the effects of church involvement and parental support on academic self-concept, and the effects of parental and teacher support on school behavior and achievement ideology. These interview excerpts also illustrate students' recognition of the importance of family-school-community connections for their well-being and academic success.

Academic Self-Concept. According to the students interviewed, church involvement provides them the opportunity to engage in a number of activities that require school-related skills — such as public speaking, reading, and analyzing texts — in a supportive, nurturing environment. According to Mark:[1]

> They [church members] think that I am smart. Others give what are basically 13 year-old comments, but after I speak, usually people come and say that they enjoyed my comments, that I sound so much like an older person.

Rick's comments also attest to the confidence and support that he receives from members of his church.

> ....I am a member of the choir, and I lead devotion. They [church members] think that I am a nice guy....Going to church gives me the confidence that I am going to make good grades, because the members always support me in whatever I do.

Similarly, students report that parents influence academic self-concept through their high expectations for performance and their encouragement of continued effort. In this light, Raymond states:

> I work pretty hard in school and am doing okay. I made an A, two Bs and one C. My parents help me a lot. They are always telling me that I can do better....I think that I can bring up the C next grading period....

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[1] All names have been changed to ensure student anonymity.

Adele's academic self-concept is also strengthened by the support she finds at home.

> My neighbors, my mother, and my aunt help me a lot with school....I know that I can do well....My mom says that if I want to achieve my goals, then I can, and I believe her. If I study and everything, I can reach my goals.

Thus, opportunities provided by the church and the support that students find there and at home serve to enhance academic self-concept.

Achievement Ideology. The family and school, through their words and practices, communicate that the skills and knowledge learned in school are important to one's life chances. Students' commented that their parents discuss the importance of school success, and monitor homework completion, and that their teachers encourage them to develop career goals and show them the link between education and the realization of those goals. Students who hear and act upon these messages are more likely to do better in school. Excerpts from interviews with Patricia and Betty provide illustration:

> ***Patricia:*** My mom and I are very close and she helps me a lot with school. She can't really help me with academic stuff because she works from 8 to 6, so most of my work I have to do by myself, but the time that she does have, she takes time and we can go over my homework, or she asks me how school was, and what happened and did I understand my homework, and do I have tests....She says that if I want to succeed I have to make a decision about school and I have. I have decided that I do want to go to high school, and that I do want to go to college.

> ***Betty:*** I think that the best thing about this school is the teachers. They give you encouragement to do your best, and help you set and reach your goals.

School Behavior. Through their support and high expectations, family members and teachers encourage students' pro-social school behavior. As Valencia notes:

> ...[My] grandma taught me the better way, she told me to change my attitude and I could live longer and have more friends that way, and get through school. She helped me and my whole family helped me. They care for me so much that if I forget something, they'll get on to me about it. She'll say, "Don't do it again, we gon' have a good talk." She tries to meet my teachers too.

> ....The teachers, they give me knowledge to set my goals, they care about me and if they didn't they would never have stopped me from being this bad girl. They talk to me a lot.

Thus, each of these institutions — the family and the school — helps students understand the importance of schooling and the benefits, both academic and social, of non-disruptive school behavior.

Conclusion and Implications

This study illustrates how students' attitudes, outlooks, and behaviors work as processes that promote achievement. These important processes are directly affected by home, school, and church support, and students benefit most when all three contexts are working toward the same goal of helping them succeed in school. The results of the study, thus, raise the following question: How can institutional resources, both material and nonmaterial, be most effectively used to promote the academic and personal success of all students? The answer may lie largely in the creation and maintenance of strong programs of school-family-community partnerships so that these institutions can better combine and coordinate the resources and support they provide the youths they serve.

This study identifies three important attitudinal and behavioral qualities that influence student success and that may be enhanced by increased cooperation between schools, families, and community institutions such as the black church. These qualities are: academic self-concept, achievement ideology or belief about the importance of school for future success, and school behavior. Each is significantly and positively related to the academic achievement of the African American, eighth-grade students in the study. These positive results are clear, even after accounting for sex, age, poverty status, and family structure. The survey results are supported and clarified by the students' own voices and explanations.

The following examples illustrate how school-family-community partnerships might enhance students' beliefs in their academic potential and the importance of school, as well as improve their school behavior in the middle grades.

Example 1

Schools in collaboration with community groups and agencies, including local churches, can conduct parenting classes and/or workshops to promote families' understanding of their early adolescents, and the families' continuing influence on students' attitudes and school behavior in middle grades. In addition, these workshops can help families strengthen and maintain skills and practices to promote more positive student behavior and attitudes toward school and the future.

Example 2

Schools, families, and community groups and agencies can design more effective communications so that students' efforts and achievements in one of these contexts are recognized and praised in the others.

Example 3

Family and community members may work as volunteers in middle schools and use the personal relationships developed with students in other settings to help teachers and administrators encourage pro-social, less disruptive school behavior.

The above examples are just a few of the many activities possible through school-family-community partnerships. The implementation of programs of partnership has begun in schools throughout the United States (Epstein, 1995). Research is needed, however, to determine whether theorized outcomes are produced by particular partnership practices. In addition, research is needed to determine which partnership practices are most effective for specific populations. Research on these topics will better enable schools, families, and communities to draw upon and combine the resources and skills they possess to promote greater achievement among all students, including African American, urban adolescents — one of the populations at greatest risk for academic failure and school dropout.

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